



PRESS RELEASE

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For Immediate Release

March 26, 2003

SOUTHWEST FLORIDA DRUG RING INDICTED

U. S. Attorney Paul I. Perez announced the unsealing of a superseding indictment of twelve individuals who are charged with bringing 2,200 kilograms of cocaine into the Naples/Ft. Myers area of Southwest Florida. Early this morning, federal, state and local law enforcement officials began arresting those indicted. Those individuals will have their initial appearance this afternoon in the Ft. Myers U.S. District Court. They are charged with conspiracy to import and importation of cocaine, as well as, conspiracy to possess and possession with intent to distribute cocaine. If convicted, they face a range of imprisonment from ten years to life on each of the four counts.

The original indictment charged Jimmie Byrd, age 59, of Homosassa, Florida. In open court it was alleged that in July of 2001 Byrd used a motor vessel to meet two "go fast" boats from Colombia in the Gulf of Mexico which contained cocaine. The 2,200 kilograms of cocaine were brought to the area of Marco Island, Florida, where it was off-loaded for distribution. After Byrd's arrest on December 13, 2002, investigators continued

their investigation as to others who were involved with and assisted Byrd. Today's unsealing of the superseding indictment and the arrest of those individuals is the result of that ongoing investigation.

This investigation is part of Operation Panama Express which is a joint effort between the U.S. Navy, U. S. Coast Guard, The Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), U.S. Customs Service, The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), U.S. Marshals Service, Internal Revenue Service (IRS), the Pinellas County Sheriff's Office, Collier County Sheriff's Office, Lee County Sheriff's Office and the Florida Department of Law Enforcement (FDLE).

This case is being prosecuted by Assistant United States Attorney Jim Preston of Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Force (OCDETF) in the Middle District of Florida.

An indictment is merely a formal charge that a defendant has committed a violation of the federal criminal laws, and every defendant is presumed innocent unless, and until, proven guilty.

Those arrested are:

NAME	ADDRESS	DATE OF BIRTH
Robert Weeks	Bokeelia, Florida	01/09/1948
Forest Weeks	Bokeelia, Florida	11/02/1946
Darrel Taylor	Naples, Florida	05/28/1950
Jimmie Byrd	Homosassa, Florida	01/15/1944
Michael Richardson	Naples, Florida	10/07/1951
Eliceo Tirado	Immokalee, Florida	12/03/1961

Nevin McLeran	Naples, Florida	02/26/1966
Freddy Flint	Bokeelia, Florida	05/05/1949
Ferrell Keith Hall	Old Town, Florida	10/29/1952
Richard Rolland, Jr.	Jupiter, Florida	04/16/1944
John Faison	Hollywood, Florida	11/25/1945
Edward Barnhill	St. James City, Florida	11/06/1975